DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 522 SP 015 033

AUTHOR Miller, William C.
TITLE Dealing With Stress: A Challenge for Educators. Fastback 130.
INSTITUTION Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, Bloomington, Ind.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 32p.
AVAILABLE FROM Phi Delta Kappa, Eighth and Union, Box 789, Bloomington, Indiana ($.75)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Personnel; *Health; *Hypertension; *Lifestyle; *Stress Variables; Teachers; *Work Environment

ABSTRACT

Sources of stress and hypertension are examined from the perspective of the professional educator and educational administrator. Physiological and psychological causes and effects of stressful lifestyles are explored, and suggestions are given for methods to deal with unhealthy amounts of stress. (IH)

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Dealing with Stress: A Challenge for Educators

William C. Miller

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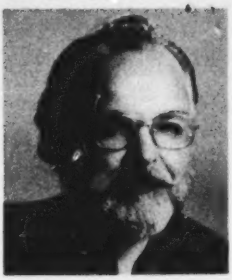

WILLIAM C. MILLER

William C. Miller is Deputy Superintendent of the Wayne County Intermediate School District (WCISD), a service agency to 36 local school districts in southeast Michigan. A major activity of the WCISD is providing staff development programs for personnel in its constituent districts. In evaluating these programs, it became obvious that in addition to improving professional skills, educators needed help in coping effectively with stress. This fastback is based on material for staff development inservice sessions.

Miller is the author of three books and over 100 articles. He is an active consultant to schools, businesses, and industry. He is a former board member and chairman of publications for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. A past president of the Michigan Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Miller was recently awarded an honorary life membership in that organization.

Miller was the recipient of the 1976 Educator of the Year Award from Phi Delta Kappa, Wayne State University Chapter. He has also received the Teacher of the Year Award at the Annual Teachers' Day at the Michigan State Fair and the Educational Leadership Award of the Leadership Development Commission of the Michigan Association of Elementary Principals.

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Dealing with Stress: A Challenge for Educators

By William C. Miller

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 79-89540
ISBN 0-87367-130-9
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Bloomington, Indiana

This fastback is sponsored by the Chicago State University Chapter of Phi Delta Kappa to memorialize the name of James H. Boganey, president of the chapter during 1977-78. He passed from us on October 20, 1978.

Mr. Boganey held a number of leadership positions, both professionally and in the community. We believe that we have learned something about life from our association with a man that we can call teacher and friend.

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What Is Stress?

Hans Selye, director of the University of Montreal's Institute of Experimental Medicine and internationally recognized authority on stress, says, ". . .Stress is the salt of life. . . . Stress wakes us up and makes us alive." His research has also shown that stress causes us a wide variety of physical problems and that stress can kill.

A world free of stress would be a world without achievement. Behind every human accomplishment lies worry, frustration, and discontent. If one were totally satisfied and free of stress, one would have little motivation to do anything. There must be a level of dissatisfaction to cause action. Avoidance of stress is not the goal. Rather a productive life needs appropriate levels of dissatisfaction, stress, or tension to get us to get the job done, but stress should not be so intense that it endangers or impairs our mental or physical health.

For educators, therein lies the problem. Our society, our modern manner of living, and the climate in many of our schools have created a stress epidemic. Surplus stress burdens teachers and administrators with fatigue, headaches, indigestion, and a host of other ailments. Educators under the tensions generated by the demands of today's classrooms and schools find it difficult to accomplish tasks in a way that meets their own personal standards. Thus, in addition to the anxiety created by the often unreasonable demands of the job, the individual's dissatisfaction with self adds to the upset.

How extensive is the problem of stress in the schools? *Instructor* magazine questioned its nearly 300,000 readers. Over 75% of the 9,000 responders to the survey indicated that the reasons they were absent from school were frequently stress- or tension-related. In all, 84% of those who

replied believed there are health hazards in teaching.

The reaction of many educators working in "pressure cooker" schools has been to take all available sick leave, to retire from teaching early, to collapse in bed at the end of the school day in order to marshal enough energy to face the next day. Many find it impossible to participate in outside interests, which are necessary for renewal of enthusiasm. Family relations suffer, adding further to problems of stress.

Specifically, what is stress? Stress begins with anxiety -- a disturbance arising from some kind of imbalance within us. All of us, each day, experience some kind of threatening condition or disharmony. This anxiety leads to tension. Tension is a physical reaction to the anxiety. When we are tense, nervous impulses cause changes in our body. When tension reaches a degree of intensity that has an adverse effect on the body, we are under stress. Perhaps it is more accurate to say we suffer distress.

What Causes Stress?

You return to your classroom to find two of your students in what appears to be a serious fight.

You receive a telephone call from the president of the board of education congratulating you on a job well done and requesting you to appear at their meeting to receive a commendation.

You've misplaced your car keys and will be late to an important meeting.

You are about to sign the papers to buy your dream home.

What do all these situations have in common? Stress! Even though two of the events are happy ones, all cause tension which, in turn, can be a source of stress. It's been found that, pleasant or unpleasant, the physical reaction to an emotional situation is basically the same.

In general, there are two sources of stress – self-imposed and situational.

Self-Imposed Stress

We often impose unrealistic expectations on ourselves. Dr. Joseph F. Montague, who has spent 50 years researching and writing about nervous tension, says, "I've never known a person who suffered from overwork. My patients suffer from *overtrying* – from having unrealistic expectations of what they can or should accomplish." This is especially true in education with so many students who need help and where pressures, responsibilities, and expectations are so high.

Many of us feel that since we are educators, we must have all the answers and be models of exemplary behavior at all times. This is an unrealistic expectation. After all, educators are human and, therefore, are not perfect. We feel we must meet the wide range of needs of the youth we

serve and prepare them to function effectively in today's complex world. Trying to live up to such high personal expectations can be extremely stressful. This is especially true as the schools more and more are looked to as the institutions to deal with an ever-widening list of social problems. Further, many think that it is necessary and possible to like and relate well to all students. We find it difficult to accept that there are limits to what the schools and we, personally, can achieve.

At times, educators also have too great a need for enhanced status or respect. We have unreasonable ego needs. It is only natural, sometimes, to feel a lack of recognition. Educators work hard, and sometimes their efforts are not appreciated. Often, the results of their contributions are not evident until years later when a student is in a position to need and use what he has been taught.

Troublesome interpersonal relations are another common cause of stress. Few jobs call for more personal contacts than those in education. It is vital to teachers' or administrators' emotional health that they be able to get along with others. When one has feelings of being disliked or even physically attacked, it is likely one will also feel undue stress.

Situational Stress

Stress can also come from outside ourselves. Values are deeply held beliefs. Having them attacked or ignored is threatening. Obviously, students often have different perceptions of what is important or what behaviors are appropriate. Also, often, the school system has rules or procedures with which an employee may disagree philosophically. Being unable to have any input into school policies or curriculum decisions about which one feels strongly can cause distress. Finding one's values perceived as no longer valid, or being caught between what one believes and what one must do, is highly stressful. If, for example, a teacher or administrator does not agree with the concepts behind the "back to basics" movement, this value conflict causes stress. Being placed in a situation where there are conflicting expectations among peers, supervisors, students, and the public is an all-too-common situation for educators. Thus, major distress can occur in a situation where there are conflicting values.

All educators, at times, suffer from lack of resources or feel they do not

have the right materials to do a good job. Many also feel they lack control over their own time and experience frequent interruptions. These professional constraints are a major source of situational stress.

A major study of teacher stress conducted by the Chicago Teachers' Union in cooperation with the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois questioned over 22,000 teachers. These teachers' opinions of the most stressful events, in rank order, were: being involuntarily transferred, managing "disruptive" children, receiving notification of unsatisfactory performance, threat of personal injury, and overcrowded classrooms.

Almost daily, educators are victims of situational stress, usually resulting from factors over which they have little or no control. Declining enrollments inevitably result in some teachers and administrators being reassigned or released. Dismissing staff is devastating for those affected and for those who must make the decision regarding who must be released. Reassignments, new preparations, and teaching in unfamiliar content areas is often required for those who remain. This, too, is stressful. Implementing programs that are mandated by legislation or by the courts, such as mainstreaming and desegregation, is another source of upset. The increased emphasis on accountability and evaluation of both students and teachers adds to the current climate of tension in schools.

Respect for the value of education seems to be declining. This results in an actual or perceived decrease in the authority and status of educators. Salaries that do not keep pace with inflation or family or personal needs result in financial stress.

There is little free time in most educators' days. Some teachers don't even have the luxury of a duty-free lunch hour, and many administrators frequently participate in intense give-and-take during business meal sessions. Many school days abound with interruptions and unexpected crises.

Our entire educational establishment – local, state, and national – is becoming more bureaucratic. This means educators are more often feeling powerless to have an impact on the system. No wonder educators are a prime target for situational stress.

Job-related (situational) stress is a major factor in human unhappiness in all fields, not just education. Studies indicate 35% of employees had complaints about lack of clarity in the scope and responsibilities of their

work. Nearly half felt trapped between people who wanted different things. Some 45% complained of work overload, with more than they could do during a given day or more than they could do well enough to preserve their self-esteem.

A study conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health looked at occupations that produced the most damaging emotional stress. The common factor in the major high-stress jobs was "being put in contact with the public in situations over which [the employees] had little control." This certainly describes the situation in which many educators find themselves.

Sociologist M. Harvey Brenner of Johns Hopkins University has recently presented a very interesting finding about the situational causes of stress. He has shown that economic changes since 1940 have resulted in increases in suicides, admissions to mental hospitals, mortality (from cardiovascular causes), imprisonment, homicide, cirrhosis, and other pathological trends. He estimates that a 1% rise in unemployment in any year will lead to an additional 30,000 cardiovascular deaths. His data reveal that, strangely enough, ". . .the period of rapid economic growth that follows directly on the heels of an economic downturn has a deleterious effect. . .even though good things are happening. . . . Long-term economic growth is beneficial, but what is clearly pathological are upswings and downswings."

Stress can come about through self-imposed factors or through the situation in which we find ourselves — usually, when there are significant changes in our lives. How can individuals tell when they are pushing themselves too hard and causing stress or when situational stress is causing trouble? The old saying may be true here: Ulcers are not caused by what you eat but by what's eating you! When work ceases to be fun or even enjoyable, you're pressing too hard. Are you eating, smoking, or drinking too much? Are you irritable, sleepless, overly fatigued? These symptoms may be the result of stress. *Stress occurs when nervous tension reaches a degree of intensity that interferes with the normal physiological processes in our bodies.*

Positive Aspects of Stress

Should our aim be to eliminate stress? What would a human being be like who was completely stress free? Perhaps immobile! Usually, there must be some feeling of dissatisfaction with the present situation to cause us to act or change. At times, we need the physical and psychological benefits of stress. We need to "get up" for the game. A burst of energy is required to meet the challenge of preparing for that extra assignment or to get ready for the board meeting.

Selye feels that the only total freedom from stress is death! No matter what you do, even during sleep, you experience a degree of stress. Your body functions and reacts even in a dream state. Some individuals thrive on stress. Many of us need stimulation to work at our fullest potential. Some persons who need excitement and tension and don't experience enough challenge on the job engage in skiing, mountain climbing, or even skydiving to get their adrenalin moving. If you are the type who needs and enjoys stress and it does not have an adverse physical effect on you, then the stress is not excessive -- it is not distress.

Results of Excessive Stress

Do you suffer from headaches (42 million people report repeated severe headaches), ulcers, backaches, constipation, indigestion, low vitality, irritability, high blood pressure, heart disease, bronchitis, arteriosclerosis, spastic colon, lack of interest in, or problems with, sex, sleeplessness (insomnia), asthma?

The majority of these conditions are caused by or aggravated by stress. Even accidents can be stress-related because distressed people are accident-prone. If you have any of the complaints above (or a wide variety of other ailments), they may well be the result of excessive stress.

Why does the body react as it does to tension? Picture this situation: Primitive man is being attacked by a predatory animal. He needs a surge of body resources to fight or to flee the dangerous situation. Into his blood flow adrenal secretions that muster strength in the form of sugar and stored fats and send them to his muscles and brain instantly, thus mobilizing full energy and stimulating pulse, respiration, and blood pressure. His digestive processes turn off at once so no energy is diverted from meeting the threat. His coagulation chemistry prepares to resist wounds with quick clotting. Red cells pour from the spleen into the stepped-up blood circulation to help the respiratory system take in oxygen and cast off carbon dioxide as he fights the beast or runs to his cave.

Today's beleaguered educator's body reacts to threat in much the same way. A call from an irate parent, a confrontation with an unruly student, unreasonable expectations on the part of one's superiors trigger these same chemical responses. The body is dumb! It reacts in the same way whether the threat is physical or emotional. The caveman's action of running or attacking used up the chemical secretions that filled his body.

Unlike the caveman, the educator can neither fight nor flee. Repressed stress or rage and tension build up without an adequate outlet. Frequent or prolonged stress wears the defense system down and deterioration sets in. In prehistoric times, the caveman was the prey. Modern man now preys internally on himself.

An excess of tension can disturb any organ that is supplied with nerves. Tension is particularly disturbing to such vital organs as those concerned with circulation (heart, blood vessels), with digestion (stomach, intestines), and with internal secretions (thyroid, hypothalamus, pituitary, gonads, and adrenal glands), all of which help regulate the functions of the body.

The hypothalamus, incidentally, is the brain segment that controls primitive reactions to anger, fear, hunger, and sex. One cannot communicate directly with these glands. They take their signals from the old brain – the midbrain. Your thoughts, reactions, and feelings at the conscious level send the "I feel calm" signal or the "flight-or-fight" signal to the primitive brain. The primitive brain then signals the glands to release the appropriate secretions.

The National Institute of Health (NIH) studied identified individuals who had intense drive, aggressiveness, ambition, competitiveness, anxiety about getting things done, and the habit of pitting themselves against the clock. They were designated as Type A. Type B individuals were equally serious but more easygoing, were seldom impatient, and took more time to enjoy leisure. They did not feel driven by the clock and were less competitive. NIH found Type As three times more likely to get heart disease in middle age. Cardiologists know heredity is a factor, but much heart disease can be traced to repressed fury and unrelenting competitiveness.

Steven Locke, a Boston University researcher, reports that persons who cope poorly with stress appear to suffer deficits in cell-mediated immunity against certain diseases. Those who cope well have active Natural Killer Cell Activity (NKCA) when the body is threatened by disease or by abnormal cells. The work of Le Shan and others cited in Gregory M. C. Querter's article, "Cancer: Clues in the Mind," (*Science News* 113, January 21, 1978) indicates that tumor cells are constantly circulating in the body and that a suppressed immune system is the major factor in allowing these neoplastic cells to implant and grow. They know that one's psychological outlook affects immunity and theorize that anxiety and

stress have an impact on the body's ability to fight off such threats.

Barbara S. Dohrenwind, professor of psychology at the City University of New York, reports that "researchers are highly successful in predicting biopsy outcomes from psychiatric examinations." Patients with a positive outlook and good mental health were much less likely to have malignant growths. Her study was one of the most extensive to date and shows graphically the relationship between a feeling of hopelessness and illness.

Sudden, stress-producing changes in life are often found to precede illness. In one study of patients with a wide variety of ailments, three out of four were found to have recently suffered a major loss – loved one, job, home. The carcinogenic (cancer-producing) and other physical symptoms caused by psychic trauma have been well documented. Loss of a central relationship is also identified by Le Shan as a prime factor in the pathogenesis of cancer. Even apparently pleasant changes, such as a trip abroad, can cause trouble. The tourist who complains about the effects of foreign food or water would probably be more accurate to blame the tension on being in a strange place. Moreover, susceptibility to minor illnesses, such as colds, may be caused by small emotional stresses.

Hans Selye believes each of us has a finite supply of life energy. Once a person has summoned it up and burned it, it is gone. "A car doesn't stop running because of old age. A part which has worn out fails. Under continuous stress – either physical or mental – some vital body part gives way, leading to a variety of illnesses, and eventually to death." If the individual is in a high stress career, he spends his portion of life energy fast and ages early.

Handling Excessive Stress

Conversations in the teachers' room more and more often turn to the price of Excedrin rather than to how to help students, because educator stress is becoming a major headache. The pressures in today's schools are causing emotional and physical distress. The body's fight-or-flight mechanism causes sizable changes in bodily functions. Sometimes the body has to mobilize to respond to emergencies or challenges. Healthful living means adjusting to tension in order that an individual can focus productively on the tasks at hand. We should recognize that certain levels of stress are normal, desirable, and aid functioning. However, if the body is under stress too often, important organs are injured, causing illness. Research has clearly shown that the harder we push ourselves, the harder our selves push back.

How is it that some educators under stress give up, give out, or begin abusing themselves with alcohol or drugs while others can function in the same situation? Generally, it has been found that people who can cope with job-related stress enjoy their work. They are "together" people with a clear sense of who they are. They like themselves and are respected by others. People who cope are seldom ill and believe they are in control of their lives. Individuals who can handle stress see change as an opportunity rather than a threat and they welcome or even seek out new experiences and innovation.

We used to believe that the body's reaction to stress was involuntary — and often it is. However, we are just beginning to understand the important role the brain plays in this process. We are finding that a person can consciously control his mind and, in turn, that the mind controls the central nervous sytem and bodily functions we once thought were beyond

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conscious outside influence. The concept of oneness of mind and body has appeared in writings for a long time, particularly in Zen Buddhist philosophy. A person cannot be divided in some arbitrary way, but is an entity with interrelated parts that are inseparable. While an accepted concept in the Far East, this idea has never been well understood and accepted in our culture. One has only to look at modern Western medicine, in which physicians become more and more specialized in one part or even one organ of the body. Too often, such overspecialization leads to ignoring psychosomatic or interrelated illnesses.

Let's look for a moment at the role of the brain and its relation to the rest of the body. The brain is a marvel! While it weighs only three pounds, a computer to equal its function would cover the entire earth! Each second, the brain sorts 100 million bits of data that the eyes, ears, nose, and touch sensors provide. It does so using far less energy than a light bulb. The brain feels no pain, yet identifies sources of pain. It orchestrates all senses and bodily functions — our thoughts and emotions. We have long known that illness is related to one's emotions. It is estimated that from 50% to 100% of illness is psychosomatic. Of such ills, the president of the Menninger Foundation, Roy W. Menninger, says:

> They can range from something as simple as the Monday morning blahs to the tension resulting from marital or family discord. I estimate that 80% of the complaints people take to their doctors — colds, upset stomach, back pains, loss of appetite, insomnia, fatigue — are not physical ills as much as psychosomatic reactions to the problems of living.

Samuel Silverman, associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, says his 30 years of research have convinced him that "All illnesses are probably psychosomatic — the result of the interaction between emotions and the body. When a person develops critical stress and cannot cope, either the mind or the body has to break down. If physical illness strikes, it doesn't do so randomly, but at vulnerable spots unique for each of us." Silverman has proven his hypothesis by accurately predicting when a particular individual will experience illness (and which part of the body will be affected), including forecasting former President Nixon's phlebitis, which occurred after he left office.

Physicians are recognizing the important role that will plays in fighting disease. At a facility for the chronically ill, it was found that statistically significant fewer persons died in the three-month period before their birthdays. It seems that if there is something to look forward to, a person can will himself to "hang on."

A person's ability to take more control over his mind and body is often essential in recovering from illness. Doctors have long been puzzled by the inexplicable recovery of certain terminally ill patients and the sudden death of others who should have recovered. Among the potent influences is the patient's psychological outlook. When the individual begins to exercise a volitional control over the progress of disease, he can often have a positive effect on his recovery. One's attitude can play a considerable part in the onset and the duration of illness. Sometimes, one's attitude can mean the difference between life and death.

We know that belief, at times, can cure us or make us ill. Voodoo curses work by suggestion. Faith healers are successful because their patients believe in them. Folk cures for warts or other diseases have proven effective over the years because people were convinced they worked — and so they did. A journalist doing an in-depth story about the great humanitarian, Albert Schweitzer, was surprised to find that he was working hand-in-hand with witch doctors in Africa. Schweitzer urged the journalist to come and observe the treatment provided. Schweitzer pointed out that natives who had, in the judgment of their witch doctor, a psychological or psychosomatic problem, received a magic incantation. Those with simple physical problems were treated with herbs or native medicines. Seriously ill natives were referred by the witch doctor to Schweitzer. Schweitzer explained:

> The witch doctor succeeds for the same reason any doctor succeeds. Each patient carries his own doctor inside him. They come to us not knowing that truth. We are at our best when we give the doctor who resides within each patient a chance to work.

Another interesting realization that provides evidence of the mind's amazing influence is found in new information about placebos. The word "placebo" comes from the Latin verb meaning "to please." It is an imita-

tion medicine — usually, a milk-sugar tablet that is in the form of a pill. In the past, its major use was in treating hypochondriacs. Now, placebos are receiving much more serious consideration. It has been found they not only look like medication, but they act like medication. The patient believes that the placebo is effective, and so it is. Researchers hypothesize that receiving the placebo activates the cerebral cortex, which, in turn, switches on the endocrine system in general and the adrenal system in particular and, thus, releases the body's natural healing powers.

We also now know that with proper training the mind can regulate all organs of the body. East Indian Yogi have stopped their hearts and breathing for prolonged periods. Training is now being offered in biofeedback techniques that allow individuals with high blood pressure to control it without medication. Diabetics have reduced their dependence on insulin and epileptics have learned to avoid seizures. Individuals with migraine headaches have been able to ward off attacks indefinitely.

The mind and body are linked. We can help the body keep healthy through our mental outlook. Biofeedback, autogenic training, progressive relaxation, Zen, yoga, and various meditative techniques are being taught as a means of reducing and preventing stress.

One of the most popular means of exercising "mind control" is TM or Transcendental Meditation. TM is a method of securing a calm state by relaxing and silently saying a nonsense word (a mantra). One practices TM twice a day for 20 minutes at a time. Does it work? Research says so. Study after study has shown that meditating can slow breathing and heart rate, decrease oxygen consumption, lower blood pressure, and decrease skin conductance (an indicator of stress). Researchers have concluded that meditation may have chemical application in stress-related disorders or it may alleviate the adverse effects of normal daily stress.

What are we finding? We are now aware that one can consciously control stress. We can cause the human body *not* to react to pressures. We do so by controlling the mind — not just the conscious mind but the midbrain (the old brain), previously thought to be beyond control. We do this by controlling the messages the conscious brain receives, for it is the conscious brain that communicates to the midbrain, and it is the midbrain that triggers the so-called automatic bodily functions. When the conscious brain sends an "all's well" signal to the midbrain, the flight-or-fight

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response is not given and the all out mobilization of the body's resources is not initiated. Indeed, the "all's well" signal causes the midbrain to trigger the decrease of secretions (such as lactate) that are a sign of stress and an increase in secretions that have a soothing rather than a harsh effect on the body.

In 1964 Norman Cousins, editor of *Saturday Review*, was stricken with a crippling disease that his doctors believed was irreversible. With one of his doctors, he developed a program calling for the full exercise of affirmative emotions as a factor in enhancing body chemistry. He watched amusing movies and, as an important part of his treatment, laughed himself well. He feels – and he has some evidence to support it – that there is a physiological basis for the old saying that laughter is good medicine. Indeed, a recent article in *Science Digest* reviews research in this area and reports that laughter "reduces health-sapping tensions and relaxes the tissues as well as exercising the most vital organs. . . . Laughter, even when forced, results in a beneficial effect on us, both mentally and physically."

How can we control the midbrain? We can do so by realizing that it is our emotions that communicate through our conscious brain to our midbrain. But we are learning that feelings and emotions are reactions we *choose* to have. Indeed, you cannot have a feeling or emotion without first experiencing a thought. A current popular book, *Your Erroneous Zones*, by Wayne Dyer, uses this concept as a major theme. One must realize that, while it is not easy to do, one can control feelings. The process involves the following steps: A feeling is a physical reaction to a thought. A feeling is a reaction we choose to have, because we permit the thought to influence us. When we can, we should realize that we can control our thoughts. Feelings come from thoughts; therefore, we can control our feelings.

For too long we have believed that a thought (stimulus) evokes a feeling or action (response). This is the behaviorist S-R bond. We place our hand on a hot stove (stimulus) and our response (to withdraw our hand) is automatic. In terms of physical stimuli, this concept usually applies. However, in most of life's situations involving feelings, there is an added element – our interpretation (I). The formula now becomes S-I-R. An example may help you understand this concept. You are waiting for an

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elevator. A woman ahead of you steps back, placing her high heel on your toe (stimulus). Your response might be: "How stupid she is for not looking before she steps back." Your interpretation might be: "Oh my, I get the worst of everything; the world's against me!" The response is one of self-pity.

Now, let's change the situation a bit. The woman turns around and you see she is blind. The stimulus is the same — a hurt toe. The response is not anger or self-pity but, rather, compassion for her and her problem. There are many examples of how our interpretation of an event influences our feelings. If a drunk observes, "Boy, are you ugly," we can dismiss the insult because we don't respect the source. If, however, a person who is highly important to us — such as our mother — makes the same observation, we may carry the thought with us throughout our lives. Educators used to believe that children from broken homes were destined to be behavior problems; then, we became astute enough to ask the question, "Why don't *all* children from broken homes have problems?" It may be that children who survive an undeniably difficult home life have mastered the art of rational thinking. They may say to themselves: "Too bad my parents are having difficulty. That doesn't mean that they don't love and care for me, or that their difficulty is my fault, or that I'm not an O.K. person."

Often, it is not what happens to us that is disturbing; it is what we tell ourselves that can upset us. The way a happening affects you is not automatic. It depends on what you tell yourself, how you react, or how you feel about an experience. We literally manufacture our own behavior. Thus, we do not become angry, nor does a person or event make us angry. We make ourselves angry.

The fact that we can control our emotions gives us a powerful weapon to deal with stress. As we learn to be more rational and less emotional about our interpretation of a situation, we can better control the level of our emotions and our degree of stress.

Preventing Excessive Stress

The alarm clock rings. "Oh, I don't wanna get up," he thinks. "The kids don't like me. The teachers don't like me. I hate going to school." His superego says, "But you've got to go; you're 45 years old and you're the principal."

Most educators cannot avoid stress by staying home. No matter how distressing, we must go to work. If you're uptight and stress-ridden now or want to be sure that you don't get that way, there are things you can do to prevent excessive stress and its damaging effects. Consider first the following simple guidelines.

One important ingredient in preventing stress is regularity. One expects one's heart to beat regularly, but one should also have regular and routine behaviors without being compulsive. Get up at a given hour, have breakfast at the same time, use the bathroom at the same time each day. Don't take an early lunch hour one day, a late one the next, and then skip lunch altogether the next. Exercise moderately and regularly (walking is great). Get to bed at the same hour each night. If you get seven or eight hours sleep and don't feel refreshed and eager to work, see your doctor because, for most people, that should be sufficient rest. Minimize your consumption of alcohol and coffee. (It's not just the caffeine; it's the oils in coffee that irritate the stomach and duodenum; thus, even decaffeinated coffee may cause problems. Consider tea or alternatives — but use all in moderation.)

Here are some other specific steps you can take to prevent becoming stress-ridden.

Look to Your Life-Style

The best thing a person can do to insure his continued existence and comfort is to learn to live in a way that is not disturbing to his body.

There are ways to prevent distress. Selye says you need physical activity and must learn coping techniques, but most important is to know how to live. Practicing what he calls altruistic egoism (being good to yourself) is vital. One should rethink one's goals in life and then set out to fulfill them. Selye urges us to pursue our own star and not to strive to conform to the expectations of others. True stress reduction will require more than a jog around the block. Charting one's own course does not mean smooth sailing, but it will be a reflection of what you want. Some specific ways to make changes in your life-style are:

Take vacations — frequent, short ones without a pre-arranged schedule. Rest is not always the essential thing. What is needed is a change of scene, a change of activity. Get out of that rut. Don't take work along; that's not a vacation.

Leave your professional worries at school.

Leave domestic troubles at home.

Avoid frustration. Ask yourself, "Is this really worth fighting for?"

Find a sport you enjoy. If it's seasonal, find others to keep yourself enjoyably active throughout the year. Suit your sport to your age and state of health.

Develop and take time for an avocation, a hobby. It's a release and release is a necessity. Recreation is an important part of one's life.

Walk more. It's great exercise. You can work off steam and become physically rather than mentally tired. Research done with senior citizens by the University of Southern California at Leisure World examined the impact of 400-milligram doses of meprobamate (a tranquilizer) against that of a placebo or 15 minutes of moderate exercise. Volunteers had symptoms such as tension, sleeplessness, and irritability. Exercise reduced tension more effectively than the tranquilizer or the placebo.

Laugh loud and often.

When confronted with a difficulty, first determine if it is really a prob-

lem. If so, there is no need to go into tantrums or uncontrolled anxiety. Ask yourself, "Is it my problem?" If it's not legitimately your problem, give it to the person responsible. (Do it in a nice way.) Then, forget about it. If it is your problem, face it and try to solve it. If you can't solve it with the knowledge or information you have at hand, get more information or try to get expert help. Having done this, there is nothing to be gained by fuming or fretting. Wait until the competent advisor suggests what to do.

Look to Your Job

Develop job skills. Your job can be a major source of stress. One major way of preventing job-generated tension is to be a more knowledgeable, efficient worker and prepare for the unexpected as well as you can. Learn key techniques to reduce stress in such areas as planning, time management, conflict management, communicating, and problem solving.

Reduce noise, distractions, and interruptions.

If you have dreaded or uninteresting tasks, do them first and save the pleasant ones for last. Don't procrastinate. A major unsolved issue can be a source of stress.

Take on one problem at a time. Give attention to the more urgent ones.

Take relaxation breaks from demanding work. Take a short walk. Do a crossword puzzle or take a short nap. Perhaps, just stand up and breathe deeply.

If necessary, schedule appointments with yourself. Plan time for recreation, rest, and diversion, and don't accept other commitments that will infringe on the time you've set aside for yourself.

There are also some important "Don'ts":

Don't work on weekends. Use the weekend for social purposes. Keep your evenings peaceful.

Working lunches are a mistake. There's more to a meal than food. There must be an aura of relaxation, of pleasantry, not a battle of wits.

Don't push people around. Try to establish a collaborative environment. Foster teamwork rather than competition.

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Don't let others push you around. If you're really being treated unfairly, stand up for your rights. Don't tolerate injustices.

Don't become a slave to work. All work and no play doesn't make Jack a dull boy; it makes him a dead one. Break your routine.

Don't trap yourself with unhealthy competition. Resist the temptation to try to edge out the other guy.

Don't go to bed in a state of emotional tension. If you're uptight at bedtime, take a long, brisk, tiring walk to burn off tension and produce enough fatigue to calm troubled thoughts. Heart expert Paul Dudley White says, "To get physically tired is the best antidote for nervous tension."

Don't bottle up resentments or "slow burns." Hate has corrosive power. When you're annoyed with someone, have it out in a frank manner. Don't seek to retaliate.

Don't set unrealistic goals; set goals and ambitions that offer a challenge and a reasonable chance of success. Remember, no one can be perfect.

Don't measure your worth by single events; measure your success by your whole life, not by a single event or a brief time span. Things can't go well all the time.

Don't resent problems. They are irrefutable evidence that you are alive! Enjoy life. One cannot live without problems.

Look to Yourself

Give yourself fully to what you're participating in. Don't just hear music; listen to it. Don't skim that good book; really digest it. Don't think about school problems on that walk or drive on a beautiful day. Open your senses and experience life. Live in the present. Don't spend useless time regretting the past.

Credit others with the same good motives that you possess.

Give the other fellow the benefit of the doubt as you would like him to give you.

Try to understand your fellow worker (or neighbor) even if you can't love him or even like him.

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Learn to understand and accept yourself as you are. Recognize your capacities, your strengths, and your weaknesses. Overtrying, not overwork, kills. Be yourself!

Be as cheerful as you can, under the circumstances. Focus on the pleasant aspects of life. Learn to take pleasure in small things.

Keep as constructively busy as you can. Be ready to help those who need help more than you do. Doing something for someone else can be a satisfying experience.

In high stress situations, remember, "This, too, shall pass."

Developing a Stress Reduction Plan

Only you live in your body. Only you can intervene to prevent excess stress. Unless you, personally, take some specific steps, things will not improve. Initiating change can be as simple as implementing one or more of the dos or dropping one of the don'ts listed earlier.

A major intervention strategy involves becoming positively addicted to a new activity. The concept of positive addiction is developed in a book with the same title by William Glasser, psychiatrist and founder of Reality Therapy. Glasser postulates that certain physical or mental activities, when done regularly, become addictive in a positive way. Further, he believes that persons who are positively addicted can cope with stress and be successful in what they do. Activities such as running, meditating, riding a bike, or reciting psalms, when done regularly and chosen freely, can have a positive and soothing effect. Glasser feels anything a person chooses to do that meets the following six criteria contributes to positive addiction and will have a favorable impact on the individual. An activity can be addictive in a positive way if:

1. It is a noncompetitive activity to which one devotes about an hour a day.
2. It is easy to do and doesn't take a great deal of mental effort.
3. It can be done alone and does not depend on others.
4. The one doing it believes it has some physical, mental, or spiritual value.
5. The one doing it believes (subjectively) that he will improve as a result of performing the activity.

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6. It can be done without criticism. One must accept oneself during the time it is practiced or it will not be addictive.

One can join with others in stress-reduction efforts. One of the most effective methods is to develop a support system. Sharing the burden can be comforting. At times of serious threat, it is essential to discuss difficulties with one or more individuals in whom you have confidence and trust. An understanding but not unduly sympathetic confidant can help you put problems in proper perspective. The confidant can suggest solutions and help examine alternatives. Discussion helps one identify, clarify, and define the problem, even if nothing more concrete comes from the conversation.

It is important for good mental health to reach out and establish deep, trusting relationships. Cultivate new friendships. If you have a close relationship with a relative, maintain it and use it as part of your support system. Think about people you know who could be helpful to you in times of stress. Talk with them and make an informal "contract" to meet both regularly and on an emergency basis to review problems and discuss alternatives.

Experience has shown that in an effective support system one needs a *comforter* (someone to whom we can turn who fully accepts us as we are). We also need one or more *clarifiers* (persons who will probe issues and help us explore and define our problems). Another important role in a support system is that of *confronter* (an individual who will cause us to focus on issues or behavior we may not be aware of or may not wish to face). Cultivate individuals to play each role. If we depend on one person to fulfill all these needs, we should question whether or not we are expecting too much from one individual.

Remember, a support system is a two-way street. In order to get support, you must give help as well. As the old saying goes, "To have a friend, you must be a friend."

Another important action we can take in concert with others to reduce stress is to involve our fellow educators in helping to improve the school climate. A pleasant, productive work situation can markedly reduce distress. Working together with others to reduce irritations and solve problems will be helpful to all. Creating a mutually supportive environment will be more healthful for students, teachers, and administrators.

Factors causing stress in our schools will always be with us. We need to learn how to handle distress and prevent excess stress. Failing to meet this challenge can have a detrimental effect on our health and will reduce the effectiveness of the education we provide. Hopefully the suggestions in this fastback will prove helpful to educators in meeting the challenge of stress.

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